

## The Value of the Kingdom

In Matthew 13:44 – 45, Jesus is recorded as saying, “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Jesus presented the kingdom as something of incomparable value, that which people should focus every resource and effort toward obtaining. Yet, in general, people in the kingdom do not behave in such a way that an observer would guess that they value it so highly.

Why is that? I think that, in many churches, the members believe that they have arrived. Whether once-saved-always-saved, or lists of benchmarks, or the understanding that you have the doctrine defined exactly, or acceptance of human frailty as the best we can do, the value of being a living stone in the spiritual house which is the kingdom (1 Peter 2:5) has lost its luster. So, this morning I will review a very simple set of concepts:

- The death of our spirits through sin and our inability to recover
- God’s initiative in rescuing us
- God’s offer of redemption

The death of our spirits through sin is first revealed in the Scriptures in Genesis 2:16 – 17, “And the Lord commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” You all know the story. In Genesis 3:6, both Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. But, in Genesis 4:2, two sons are born, so much more than a day had passed, and both Adam and Eve were still walking about on the earth, by all outward appearances, alive.

How do we explain this? Our customary, and I believe correct, explanation is that Adam’s spirit died when he sinned, although his body and his mind continued to function. The apostle Paul confirms this concept in Ephesians 2:1, “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” Obviously, the Christians of the church in Ephesus were physically alive both before and after they became Christians, so again we must conclude that, in sin, our spirits die. Of course, the spirits of Christians are resurrected at baptism, as Paul wrote in Romans 6:4, but I will get to that in a little while.

In Romans 7, Paul describes the nature of life before that resurrection of our spirits at baptism, the life of those who desire to do what is right, but just cannot seem to get it right. As Paul noted in Romans 7:9, “I was once alive without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.” In verse 15, “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.” After a thorough recounting of this terrible state, he concludes with, in verses 24 and 25, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.” Paul reveals the hopelessness of those who desire with all their hearts to serve God, but, being realistic, see themselves failing again and again. Unfortunately, many people stop reading at that point and come to the conclusion that the “wretched man” of chapter 7 represents Christians. It does not – unless you are willing to admit that your spirit remains dead and is not resurrected at baptism. God did not leave us in the state of wishing to do good and practicing what we hate, of serving the law of God with our minds despite serving the law of sin with our bodies. In chapter 8, Paul

announces the cure, which we will get to shortly. But in chapter 7, Paul gives us the result of a body and mind without a living spirit: a body out of control.

Isn't that where the world lives? Of course, some people don't care a thing about God. Paul describes them in Romans 1 as "darkened" and that "God gave them over." We are not talking about them. Paul in Romans 7 describes the person who earnestly desires to serve God, but finds that it isn't working – because of the lack of a spirit, killed by sin.

How do people deal with this life of failure? Some have come up with a doctrine that their minds and bodies are separate, that they can have faith in their minds, be counted righteous by God, but what their bodies do doesn't matter. In the first century, this was called gnosticism. The apostle John calls it the spirit of the antichrist. It is alive and well in our time, too. Many people who call themselves Christian willingly fool themselves with this excuse. Everyone who accepts that sin in the life of a Christian is inevitable is a modern-day Gnostic, the antichrist. But, I suppose it's the best they can do to deal with a life of constant failure.

Others don't try to excuse their sin, but still cannot overcome, so they endure constant guilt. They have a faint hope that perhaps God will accept them despite their flaws. But they have no realistic hope, and without a realistic hope, one cannot have a saving faith. They continue to fail because they lack one-third of themselves. The spirit is dead.

When our spirits are dead, we cannot even understand the cure. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:6, the mind without its spirit "is not subject to the law of God, nor can it be."

What would we pay for a release from a life of self-delusion like the Gnostics, or a life of guilt and doubt like the wretched man in Romans 7, or a life of constant failure like Romans 8:6?

We can read in the news on just about any day a story about someone with a debilitating or fatal illness who was duped by a medical charlatan who promised a cure through a method that no healthy person would ever think was reasonable. Desperate people suspend their judgment and attempt ridiculous treatments because of the potential value of the cure.

What is it worth to obtain a cure for the out-of-control body? Are we grasping at straws, cures that a reasonable person would find ridiculous? Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man [the 'natural man' was a term from Greek philosophy representing the best that the world had to offer: the honest, upright, ethical person] does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." But, if the natural man, the best in the world, cannot understand, what is the point of preaching? That's why Paul makes proof his most important point. Proof is something that the natural man can understand. It is not spiritually appraised. It is logically appraised. Paul wrote about his focus on proof to the unbelieving in 1 Corinthians 15, starting in verse 3, "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and He was buried and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by..." a whole bunch of people. Paul's point was proof – this is the topic of first importance. Unfortunately, many people have taken that paragraph out of its context and declare that the topic of first importance is that Jesus died for our sins. That is an important topic, but it makes no sense to the natural man. Paul's point in the whole paragraph was that it was proven. Jesus' death and resurrection were clearly predicted and they clearly happened. A cure for the dead spirit, for the out-of-control body is being offered. While it may seem unreasonable to the spiritually dead (who are, after all, the intended users of this new treatment), the proof is overwhelming.

If the gain is perceived to be big enough, people will try it, no matter what the cost, whether they understand it or not, whether it seems foolish or not. We do that with medical

cures. We may not understand what the doctor just said, but if the percentages are with it, we'll try what we don't understand. We do the same with financial prescriptions. If you are like me, you have no idea what it means to invest in this company versus that company. We take the recommendation of our financial advisors. But what is the cost? Cost is something we understand, and we need to weigh the costs versus the benefits. The cost is something we will look into in a little bit. But, if the gain is big enough, we will sell all we have to obtain it, which is the line of argument that Jesus used in those parables in Matthew 13. As Jesus said in Matthew 16:26, "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Do you put yourself in that picture? Is an out-of-control body a big enough disaster to warrant total commitment to the program? Would we really sell all we have in order to obtain it? That is Jesus' question.

If the depth our hopelessness that results from killing off our spirits through sin is not motivation enough to sell all we have to obtain something that just might rescue us from despair, a second facet of the plan of God that the world, and perhaps the church, overlooks is God's initiative. Without a living spirit, we do not have the tools to be reconciled to God. The concept of Judgment tells us that we will meet a terrible end, if, that is, our minds have not been so darkened that we excuse ourselves.

But the Creator knows His creation. He created us with the freedom to choose, so He also planned for our wrong choices. God was not taken by surprise by any of the sins of man. He had the plan in place before He created the world and He accounted for all the options, all the choices, good and bad, that man could make. As Paul put it in Ephesians 1:3 – 11, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the richness of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will." Paul brought up the concept of God's planning before the Creation twice more in this letter, in chapter 3.

God made a plan for our wrong choices "before the foundation of the world," and "in the dispensation of the fullness of the times," "from the beginning of the ages" in 3:9, and "according to the eternal purpose" in 3:11. Paul also described a part of that plan as the sacrifice of Jesus, "redemption through His blood." Those are the parts we tend to focus upon, but there was a lot more in that paragraph, like spiritual blessings in verse 3, choosing us in verse 4, predestination in verse 5 and verse 11. These, too, are important parts of the plan that we must not explain away. I will address them a little later, but for now, just remember the death knell of Calvinism, or individual predestination; if you are asking me to believe that individual predestination is true, then you are acknowledging that I have the ability to choose. If I can choose, then my salvation or my condemnation is by my choice, not by the predetermined plan of God. If individual predestination is true, then we are living out a gigantic deception perpetrated by God, because we think that we choose. God has given us the ability to choose – a

concept repeated hundreds of times in the Bible – so God has restricted Himself from interfering in the choices we make. But, election, being chosen, and predestination are all Biblical concepts. How are these things reconciled? I'll get to it in a few minutes.

But first, we should consider another facet of the initiative of God. Not only did He plan for all our wrong choices ahead of time, before the creation, He also planned for the cure for our wrong choices. He planned a way for justice to be served without leaving the creation He loves to destroy itself. Paul wrote about the magnitude of the sacrifice of Jesus in Colossians 1:21 – 22, “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and blameless and above reproach in His sight.” 1 Corinthians 5:7, “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed.” 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Ephesians 5:2, “And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling aroma.”

If God is perfect, then His justice is perfect. God cannot simply wave His hand over our sin and make it go away, because Justice must be served. So, Jesus became the perfect sacrifice, offered once for all.

But that is not the whole picture. Paul brings out that fact in Romans 5:6 – 7, “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die.”

Paul acknowledged that, although dying for the sake of another is rare, it does happen in this world. So the fact that Jesus died for us is not unique. There is more to the story than the fact that a sinless man gave His life in exchange for ours, a propitiation, Paul calls it in Romans 3:25, as does John in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10. Most people stop the message of the gospel at that point, omitting the fact that, although self-sacrifice is rare in the world, it does happen. If we stop with the sacrifice of Jesus, we have made Him no different than the natural man, the best this world has to offer. Although a sacrifice that is worth more than we can satisfy justice, it cannot undo the sin. The ripples of sin have gone out into the world and cannot be called back. And, damage has been done to my mind, in addition to the death of my spirit. How are we to fix the complications of sin after the sin itself has been atoned? God has a plan for this, too. But first, let's continue with more of God's initiative. God planned for sin before sin happened. He planned to satisfy Justice through the sacrifice of Jesus. And, as He set that plan in motion, God placed Himself on the line. God accepted tremendous personal risk in His own plan.

Risk. Do we consider that God took a risk in this plan? Consider this. Jesus was tempted in all points just as we are (Hebrews 4:15). For temptation to be real, Jesus had to have the opportunity to sin. Many people deny this, which also denies that Jesus was tempted, that the temptation in the wilderness was a sham, and the Hebrews 4:15 is false. People turn to James 1:13, “God cannot be tempted by evil,” setting up a contradiction in the Scriptures which says that Jesus is God (1 Thessalonians 3:11, 2 Thessalonians 2:17, John 1:1, John 20:28, 1 John 5:20, Colossians 2:9). Philippians 2:5 – 7, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.” Having emptied Himself, He was subject to temptation just as we are, as Hebrews 4:15 so clearly states. Jesus had the ability to choose badly, just as we choose badly, yet He did not. Did Jesus succeed where we fail because He had an edge? Jesus had a human body, a human mind, but His spirit was God. This is why the Scriptures sometimes call Jesus God. Is that the reason that Jesus was able to complete His earthly life without sin? No. If Jesus had an edge over us, then

He was not tempted in all points as we are and His sacrifice would have been of no more value than an animal sacrifice, the substitution of something that could not sin for something that chose to sin. Jesus lived an entire life with more and greater temptations than we face, yet without sin. The fact that Jesus accomplished a sinless life takes away our last excuse for the way we are, the excuse that our sin is inevitable. Our sin is our choice; we could have chosen correctly at every turn. We just didn't.

I have a suggestion as to how Jesus may have been able to pull off a sinless life. Of course, Mary and Joseph knew that their son was going to be the Messiah. God told them. A couple of prophets, Simeon and Anna, confirmed it in the Temple when they brought Jesus to be enrolled. The magi showed up. Herod tried to kill the baby Jesus. Although the Scriptures do not tell us specifically, I think it is reasonable to assume that Jesus' family told Him a thing or two about His miraculous beginnings. And, Jesus would have been educated as a youngster, and read all the Messianic Scriptures like all the other boys. But for Jesus, it was personal. Those passages were describing Him, and I think He knew it. I think Jesus had an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility to carry out this task that would ransom mankind from its self-imposed condemnation. From those same Scriptures, Jesus would know that He would suffer. He would know all about Isaiah 53. By the time He was 12, in that scene in Luke 2, he was already remarkably knowledgeable, with great understanding. He had spent His entire childhood knowing who He was. He was focused. He knew His job. He did it, never turning to the right or the left. This doesn't give Jesus any advantage, but it does keep Him on His toes.

Are we so different? Do we not have the same job to do, to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ? (Colossian 1:24, 1 Peter 4:13) To be Christ on this earth, the body of Christ? I suppose the difference is that, once we sinned the first time, our spirits died, and we lacked the control mechanism to keep our minds and bodies in line. Jesus didn't sin the first time, so He had all His parts in place all the time.

But, what if Jesus had chosen badly, just once? What if, on the cross, Jesus had thought, "In Noah's day, God got sick of a world full of sin, wiped them out with a flood, and started over. In Moses' day, after the golden calf incident, God told Moses to step aside because He was going to wipe out Israel and start over – an intention Moses averted with some clever bargaining. Well, I've had about enough of this. I think we need to wipe them out and start over." He had the power. But instead, He chose to be the perfect sacrifice. But what if He didn't? What happens when we sin? Our spirits die. What would have happened if Jesus had sinned? His spirit would have died. And His spirit was God. If Jesus had chosen badly, redemption would have failed. More importantly, God would have died. The universe as we know it would have ended. Perhaps the material and spiritual realms would have continued in chaos in eternal conflict between the forces of good and evil, like the Chinese philosophy of the yin and the yang, the devil and his angels waging war with Michael and his angels, forever. Many people believe that such a spiritual war exists, as if Jesus had failed. Or, if Jesus had chosen badly just once, perhaps everything would have self-destructed. Nevertheless, God put Himself on the line as Jesus' spirit. God risked everything for us; God risked His very existence, and He did it right here on earth.

Does this not make the kingdom of tremendous value? Would we sell all that we have to obtain it? We chose badly and our spirits died justly. God planned, even before He set the universe in motion, for our bad choices – but not cheaply. God placed His own existence in jeopardy in order to create a sacrifice that was exactly like us, yet without sin, to atone for all people of all time. The sacrifice of Jesus was much more than a nice guy being executed

unjustly. That happens all over the world every day. God took the risk to demonstrate that He loves us, to prove concretely that we have no excuse, and to illustrate what it looks like if you don't kill your spirit along the way. (I will talk about getting our spirits resurrected at baptism a little later.)

So far, God's initiative might seem a little impersonal. God's plan was for everyone, not specifically for me as an individual. Jesus' sacrifice was for everyone, not specifically for me as an individual. God's personal risk was for everyone, not specifically for me. My name was not on some list before the creation of the world as one of those who would spend eternity in heaven, or on the other list as someone who would spend eternity in hell. So, is there a personal, individual side to God's initiative? Does God account for me, personally, in His grand scheme? Or am I just one of the pawns? Not that being one of the pawns is just a bad thing. We pawns could still get to heaven. But it would be an additional draw to remain faithful to know that God planned for me, personally.

There is one more facet of God's initiative that is personal, a part of the plan in which God makes decisions and causes things to happen that are specific and individual for each person. God's plan had a piece that was specific to me. And there is a piece that is specific to each individual on earth. It goes like this.

Do you know the story of Cornelius in Acts 10? God knew that Cornelius, a centurion, was a devout man who feared God. So, God engineered a meeting between Cornelius and the gospel. If you read the story, you will see that God went to quite a bit of trouble to get the message to Cornelius. God seems to have chosen a certain method for spreading the gospel, and that is through personal contact with Christians. The New Testament contains several stories of things that God made happen so that specific individuals could hear the message: the eunuch in Acts 8, Saul in Acts 9, an unnamed group of specific people in Acts 13:48, the crippled man in Lystra in Acts 14:9. Think about all the accounts of the spread of the gospel. It does not say that God sent someone to some country to preach the gospel, and since it was preached in such a way so as to be accessible to all in that country, they all had their chance to seek it and choose it, and therefore were accountable. No, you read about various Christians going and establishing the proof of the gospel to individuals. The account of the initial spread of the gospel to the whole world is presented as good news brought to individuals. It is not presented as the good news presented to cultural groups or geographic entities. It was personal, not generic. And, the message was brought directly, face to face, to those people. God did not require that unbelievers seek Him. God smacked them in the face with the good news. Here it is; now choose. As a wise man once said about the church today, "It is not the job of the lost to go church; it is the job of the church to go to the lost."

Has God stopped going to all this trouble to bring the gospel to individuals like Cornelius and the Ethiopian and the Samaritans and the Philippians and the Thessalonians and the Colossians? Does God no longer engineer meetings between good hearts and the good news? I think He still does, if for no other reason than prayer. God promised to act on the prayers of the faithful. If we pray for the spread of the gospel, God has committed Himself to doing something about it. Does that make us uncomfortable, or does it make us special? On the one hand, it makes us very special, that God went to the trouble to send the good news individually and personally to me through some believer. But on the other hand, as a believer, it makes me uncomfortable. That means that God might send me.

First, let's consider the part about God sending the gospel to me. This is where those passages about the chosen and the elect fit in. Of course, some of those passages about, for

example, being predestined, due to the context, as I already read in Ephesians 1, are about God's plan – those who fit in the plan are predestined, but the context does not support the idea of individual predestination to salvation. But what about that crippled man in Lystra in Acts 14:9, "Observing him intently and seeing that he had the faith to be made well." Or those who heard the message in Acts 13:48, "As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." Or the Christians of Colossae, whom Paul calls "the elect of God." Or the Thessalonians, in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, "Because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." And there are several more.

God engineered the meeting of good hearts with the good news. He was doing it in the first century. I see no reason that He is not doing it now.

But who are these chosen, these elect, for whom God goes out of His way to cause them to meet the gospel and make their choice for eternal life? And is that not unfair to those for whom God makes no special effort? God explained that – several times in the New Testament. It is true that God goes out of His way to bring the message to some and not to others. But which ones? How does God choose? Is this fair?

Remember Romans 1? Romans 1:21, "Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened." And in Romans 1:24, "Therefore God gave them up..." God used the same figure of speech in Ephesians 4:17 – 19, "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over..." David even prayed for this situation in Psalm 69:23, and Paul quoted it in Romans 11:10, concerning the wicked, "Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see." In 2 Corinthians 4:3, "Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose mind the god of this world has blinded, who do not believe lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them." In other places they are said to have hard hearts.

All who have sinned – which would be all of us – killed our spirits. Without a working spirit, our minds proved to be inadequate to the task of controlling our bodies. But, just like Paul described in Romans 7, the anguish of the person with a dead spirit but a mind that still remembers what it was like to be in control, many people still know right from wrong. They still want to know God. Their light bulbs are still glowing, albeit dimly. They have not been "darkened." God has not given up on them. God goes out of His way to bring the gospel to each dim bulb in the world, individually. He did it for me. He did it for you. None of us went in search of God. He sought us, one at a time, through some messenger of the gospel. As in Romans 10:14, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" Or verse 17, "So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." God makes the meetings happen – individually. That's what we see all through the New Testament. All we had to do was take God up on His offer. God makes choices about to whom He will send the Gospel. He sent it to every dim bulb. God has elected those dim bulbs to hear the gospel up close and personal, but they still have to choose to accept the offer, which brings up that uncomfortable feeling again. If God sends the message by way of a person to every dim bulb, whom does He send? We will get to that answer in a few minutes.

But, back to the point at hand, God made me an offer. Unfortunately, it is not one of those offers that one cannot refuse. Many have done so. But even a dim bulb can see enough to know that this is the deal of a lifetime – or, more exactly, the deal of eternity. But, I am afraid that the offer has been poorly absorbed by many. The early Christians were in the same boat, and if misunderstandings happened, you can bet they happened in Corinth. I think that one of the best concise statements of God’s offer is in 1 Corinthians 6:19 – 20, “Do you not know that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” You were bought with a price. The price was the risk taken by God for us, coming to earth to face the same challenges we face, to demonstrate what success is despite tremendous opposition, to die under terrible circumstances, and to be our sacrifice. We were an expensive purchase.

Sometimes we get a little too attached to the ideas of liberty and freedom. And those are great concepts of the gospel. But we were not simply ransomed from our certain bad result at Judgment and turned loose to start over. We were not simply set free from the slavery of sin to make our own decisions. In Romans 6:18, Paul wrote, “Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” God’s offer is to become His slave, and also to become His Temple. God’s offer is one of tremendous responsibility; we represent God on earth. And we are not free. We are not our own. An unfathomable risk was taken in order to purchase us from our self-imposed anguish of a life out of control and an eternity of Judgment.

Being a slave of God looks a whole lot better than being free, because I have seen my own track record with freedom and it wasn’t pretty.

Of course, you are probably thinking about the passages about being adopted as sons of God, brothers of Jesus. Those are in there, too. Galatians 4 describes the transition from slaves of God to sons of God. “Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all.” When we came to faith, we became children of God, but no different from slaves. But that’s perfectly fine with me. Being a slave of God isn’t such a bad job. Certainly, He owns my body and can use it for His purposes. He may bang it up a bit in the process, but, again, that’s okay – I’ll get a new one later.

The transition from slave to heir is where all those “babes in Christ” passages fit. Like 1 Peter 2:1, “Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word.” Or the flip side in Hebrews 5:13, “For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the Word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” Or 1 Corinthians 3:1, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.”

But how does this work? If I did not have enough power to control my body before, how am I supposed to do it when I am the Temple of God? Now that it is so much more important to do things right, my chances of failure look alarmingly high. God’s offer accounts for that, too.

How can we succeed after a life of failure? How can we escape that description in Romans 7, “What I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.” That was an accurate description of us as minds and bodies out of control because of dead spirits. But, as Romans 6:4 says, “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Something about us was raised in baptism. The next verse connects this image to our resurrection on Judgment day, but verse 4 speaks of walking in newness of life now, on this

earth. How can we do this after such failure? Two reasons. First, our dead spirits are resurrected in baptism. As in Colossians 2:12, “Buried with Him in baptism in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” As Paul put it in Ephesians 2:4 – 6, “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Our dead spirits were resurrected and are now seated in the heavenly places – not back in us. We have minds and bodies here on earth, but our spirits are seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

But what takes the empty spot in me? The house has been swept clean, but if it remains empty, worse residents will come back to inhabit it, to borrow Jesus’ illustration from Matthew 12 and Luke 11. But we are not empty. As I have already read from 1 Corinthians 6, we are Temples of the Holy Spirit who is in us. The Spirit gives life to our mortal bodies in Romans 8:11. The Spirit of God dwells in us in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and Romans 8:9. And the Spirit that dwells in us is God (Acts 5:3 – 4 and 2 Corinthians 3:17 – 18). What is the value of a resurrected spirit that is safely seated in the heavenly places in Christ, and to have the Spirit of God living in us? We now have all the parts that Jesus had. Would we sell all that we have to obtain it?

But what is the function of this Spirit that dwells in every Christian, this Spirit we receive when we are baptized?

Through this Spirit we are given the ability to love as God loves, in Romans 5:5, “Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

Through this Spirit we are given understanding of the gospel, as in 1 John 5:20, “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding.” And remember that the natural man cannot understand (1 Corinthians 2:14). We are given understanding, and that understanding grows as we mature and put to death the deeds of the body.

Through the Spirit we are given clean consciences, in Hebrews 9:14, “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” I think that Paul wrote of the same concept in Titus 3:5, “He saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

Through the Spirit we are granted righteousness, as in Romans 5:17, “Those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness.” Romans 3:22, “The righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe.”

Through the Spirit we are given the power to overcome this life, Romans 8:13 – 14, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” This Spirit strengthens the inner man, Ephesians 3:16.

The Spirit translates and corrects our prayers, Romans 8:26 – 27.

The objective of all of this, in Ephesians 4:13, is that “we all come to a unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about on every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head, even Christ.” This is the

objective on earth, not just in heaven. God has given us all the tools. Falling short of the glory of Jesus is not because we are destined to sin. We simply choose badly. There is no excuse.

But why does God seek us out, wait for our choice, then clean us up, give us power to overcome and to understand, and leave us here in the midst of all this temptation and danger. We can throw this all away if we are not careful. I have heard several Christians wonder about this, both about God's plan in which we are left on the front lines, and the possibility that we might fall away.

Is it possible, after choosing God, being cleansed, receiving the Spirit, being given power and understanding, to then choose to throw it away. Theoretically, yes. God cannot remove our choice. We think we choose, therefore we choose, or God is the great deceiver. Would someone actually throw all of this away? Some claim not. I say, never underestimate the stupidity of people. As in Romans 11:20 – 22, "Because of unbelief they [the unbelieving Jewish folks] were broken off, and you [believing Gentile folks] stand because of faith. Do not be haughty but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore, consider the goodness and the severity of God; on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off." The same idea is presented in Hebrews 6:4 – 6.

So, why does God leave us here? Because He has chosen to send the good news to those good hearts through Christians. God could have chosen to rain Bibles on those dim bulbs and save the Christians the trouble. God could have scooped up the newly righteous, still wet from baptism, straight to the heavenly places in Christ. But He did not. We are Christ on this earth, individually and collectively. And the job of taking the good news to good hearts has been left to us. As in 2 Corinthians 4:2, "Commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." And 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus." And 4:11, "that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." And 13, "I believed, therefore I spoke." And 5:11, "Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." And 5:18, "We have been given this ministry of reconciliation." And 5:20, "we are ambassadors for Christ." All these descriptions refer to all Christians, not just special ones we like to single out, no matter which clerical title we assign: minister, evangelist, preacher, reverend, or archbishop. Paul began that section in 2 Corinthians with "we all," referring to all the Christians in Corinth. Unless the Christians in Corinth were somehow distinctly different than we are, this job is ours, too. We, individually and collectively, are the image of Christ to the world. We are those who take the good message to those good hearts.

But we don't know which bulbs are still lit. Only God can see that. How can we succeed? I submit to you that if God went out of His way to send the good news to good hearts in the first century, He is still doing it, because I see no other method mentioned anywhere. God opens the doors and He expects us to walk through by faith, not knowing where we are going or whom we are meeting. The specifics are God's responsibility. We walk by faith, not by sight. We are led by the Spirit. If we don't do it, we are like Jonah who was given a job and ran the other way. We are like Ephesus in Revelation 2 who left their first love and would have their lampstand removed. We are like Laodicea, who made God sick. Speaking the good news is a natural characteristic of saving faith. If we do not speak, we do not have the kind of faith that is counted as righteousness.

You were bought with a price. You are not your own. (1 Corinthians 6:19 – 20). And Romans 12:1 – 2, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present

your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

This is the pearl of great price. Have we sold all we own to possess it?